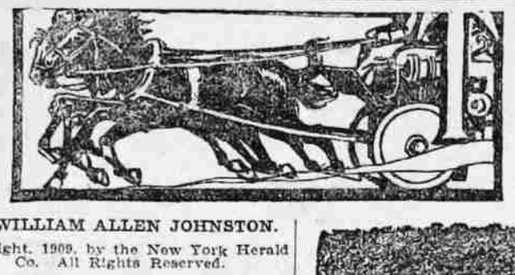

THRILLING LIVES

THE FIRE ENGINE DRIVER

BY WILLIAM ALLEN JOHNSTON.

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To the rear of the spacious ground floor of the Great Jones street station stands in patient, watchful array, a line of fire aids whom Chief Croker styles "the best arm of the service."

There are nine of them at this station, all of them bays with white noses, all of them groomed till their flanks glisten, all of them scarred by the hard knocks of service, all of them loved and respected by every inmate of the big, busy station house, from the urchin who hovers admiringly about the front doors up to the fire chief himself.

Directly over their heads as they stand breasting the rubber-bound chains of their stalls are these names in gilt letters on swinging wooden signs: "John," "Dick," "Joe," "Charlie," "George," "Tom," "Steve," "Dan," "Frank" and "Bob."

They are "first raters' all of them and fire fighters true and tried, from the instant the gong clangs till they come rolling home with heaving sides and distended nostrils. "That Joe," says the captain fondly, "you can't hitch wrong. Put him anywhere—engine, tender, middle or sides—and he'll work like he filled the place all his life. That Dick is a biter—look out for him—but he's a wonder on the 'roll.' That John"—and so the merit marks go on. But the captain stopped longest at the middle stall before a heavy bay with four white feet. The "George horse," they call him, and his fame is known throughout the department. He hasn't the sleek, rounded sides of the younger horses—he is fourteen years old and has been in service nine hard years—but he wears the cool, indifferent look of the veteran and he stands ever in a characteristic pose, one foot forward, ready for the straightest, swiftest dash to the pole and harness, and he bears long scars upon his breast and forelegs, where once the flesh must have hung in strips.

Which brings us to that big engine that stands to the fore of the station house, and thence upstairs to a driver who walks with a limp and whose escape from death in a wild ride one night seems little short of miraculous.

That engine is a veteran, too, battle-scarred and worn. The whole front part of her has been built anew out of twisted steel and new parts. But she still stands up to her name of "six ton, extra first,' 'and under the last test of the underwriters she pumped one thousand gallons a minute, which was her highest capacity the day she came out of the shops. The captain speaks fondly of her also, just as he does of George or any other objects, animate or inanimate, with character and more than human faithfulness in them.

On the back of the big upright nickeled boiler there are two deep dents, one three inches long and narrow and the other almost round and quite as deep. "That lone one," said the captain gravely, "was made by the engineer's helmet—Engineer Teckler—he's here now. The other dent, the round one, was made by the chin of the assistant foreman, who was riding on the steps."

"His chin!" Such a blow, it seems, must have driven a jawbone into the base of the skull. "Was he killed?"

"Oh, no," said the captain easily; "just knocked unconscious. First we thought he was—thought his neck was broken—'cause he wiggled so. But he came out all right."

But this is getting ahead of the story.

One midnight, a zero cold one in February last year, they "rolled" to a fire at Tenth street and Third avenue, Driver Corbett in the seat and three bays plunging in their collars—Dick the nigh horse, Frank in the middle and veteran George on the off side.

The gong was good till the big "six ton" reached Seventh street, where suddenly the nigh horse "spread." A snap hook in front had broken and, the holding power of the harness gone, he swerved far out.

They were just skirting the iron pillars of the "L" road at that moment, and Driver Corbett made a quick, frenzied effort to whip in his horse with a swoop of one rein. At the same time veteran George, cool headed, quick of thought and action, threw his powerful shoulders sidewise and lunged with all his weight in an effort to swing with his heavy mates out from that deadly line of iron posts.

Even in that brief thrilling moment Corbett saw and sensed the wonderful animal's quick comprehension and strategy, and a soft light comes now to his eye as he speaks of it. "Aw, he did noble!" said he softly.

But it couldn't be done. One post they passed and another, but the third caught poor Dick head on, and he dropped like a shot with a fractured skull. His fall swept the reins from the driver's hands and left him powerless. Worse still, the cling of Dick's traces and the tilt of the wheels over his body swung the rushing engine in and full on toward another post.

"Thud!" This time it was "Frank's" head against the pillar; and then "Crash! bang!" the massive engine rode over his body and crumpled up before the terrific impact of steel against iron.

Then "George" did that act that is talked about today in the fire house dormitories when the taps of the gong are far between and the gossip turns to horses.

That sudden stoppage of the engine threw him back upon his haunches and a swinging whiffletree tore a ragged hole in his breast as his forefeet rose high in the air. But his traces parted, and with only that momentary check in his headlong course he galloped straight on, head up, nostrils distended and cool, steady eye fixed upon that building three blocks ahead whose windows were belching smoke and flames.

He was doing his duty, that's all, as he interpreted it—plunging on to his everyday goal, the blaze ahead, even though he was alone and the only remaining conscious part of his outfit of men, horses and mechanism.

At his goal's end he drew up beside a hydrant, faced the fire as if in challenge, whinnied loudly for the blue-shirted figures he was accustomed to and now could not find anywhere, and then, wheeling, he trotted back to his fallen mates and stood quivering beside them, his own blood mixing with theirs.

"There's a horse," said the captain tersely, "and," he might have added, "a fireman."

When the tender of engine No. 33 galloped up to the scene of the accident it found a terrific wreck. To the rear lay the engineer and assistant foreman, both stunned by the crack of their heads against the boiler. That boiler was all that remained intact of engine No. 34. The whole front of it, from the steel dashboard back, was completely telescoped. It took the combined power of two trolley cars to pull it back from its tangled grip on the pillar, itself twisted and broken.

Up the rear, swaying back and forth and enduring such pain as few men could bear and yet live, was Driver Corbett. One leg from the knee down was caught and held, crushed and flattened, in that dense tangle of steel. He was conscious, and for forty minutes he sat there with his pain till they bent the twisted metal away from his maimed limb.

I have often heard it stated that in such severe injuries the nerves are completely paralyzed and little pain is felt at first, and I asked Corbett if this was true.

He shook his head earnestly. "Oh, no, sir. She hurt from the first—hurt bad. You see, the bone was broken in three places from the knee down—all multiple fractures, they called them. The ankle was bad. The bones stuck right through the shoe and the front part of my foot was turned back toward the heel."

It is quite remarkable that Corbett survived at all; it is still more remarkable that his leg was saved. For two weeks he lay in the hospital sleepless and racked with pain while the surgeons toiled over him and pieced together the splintered bones and torn flesh. Whoever they were, they did an unusual and most skilful piece of work. Corbett hobbles about the station now on fire duty—he will never drive again—but he has two good legs under him.

Practically every driver in the service had previous experience with horses, generally in some branch of city delivery work, before he became a fire truck or engine driver. There is a vast difference, however, between delivery driving and fire driving; also a fire driver's success depends very largely upon his knowledge of his horses and their knowledge of him, so he begins training the moment he enters the service, generally by driving home from fires.

The life is a thrilling one. There's not a station in the city that has not its drivers' stories—stories of horses swung into "L" pillars to save the lives of children in the streets, stories where drivers have endangered their lives and almost lost them in attempts to save their horses—for the bond of affection is a very close, enduring one between the men and horses of the fire engines.

It would seem as if the driver's seat were dangerous enough, but he must take other risks than this, and the call to extra duty comes very often. His place at the fire is with his horses, except when the unforeseen happens and he must jump to a perilous rescue, sometimes without orders and often alone and unaided.

Late one night, just shortly after I had left a station house in the Bowery district, the engine rolled out to a fire in Chinatown. The blaze was a weird sight. The denizens of the strange little Asiatic city, mindful of a recent murder committed by one of their people and fearful that their ancestral gods were therefore wreaking vengeance on them, made the night a pandemonium with their cries and gibbering, squeaking voices.

A restaurant known as "Cheap John's," a lodging house, a brass store and a Chinese hospital were involved. From the latter building a file of policemen and firemen came in a strange, silent procession, carrying huddled burdens of the blind, the lame and the paralytic inmates. The houses for the most part were wooden, and burned like tinder, with sudden back draughts of brilliant flame that lit up the outlandish scene with great eerie flashes.

It was quick work all around. Some twenty Chinamen were rescued from a fire escape which was heating up so rapidly that those who were crowded against the iron railing screamed with pain as the hot metal seared their flesh, and were led into the smoke filled room and out through the main hall. An instant later the building was a volcano of flame, and the firemen were ransacking the adjoining restaurant for other panic stricken inmates.

Out in front of the burning lodging house stood Driver Decker beside his horses and Deputy Chief Guerin, who was directing his men with an all seeing eye and sharp orders. A crowd of Celestials surrounded them jabbering, so the chief thought, with the panic symptoms that usually go with a Chinatown fire. Finally one, who could speak a little English, clutched the arm of Driver Decker and pointed up to a fire escape landing on the fourth floor.

"See!" he appealed. "Two more! Save, quick!"

Driver Decker looked up, and as the flames and smoke curled away for an instant he made out the huddled forms of a man and a woman crouching down inertly before a fire bleching window. Either they were unconscious or else stolidly they chose a roasting death to rescue. They made no outcries, nor any attempt at escape.

That fire escape was like a red hot grill. It was out of the question to climb it. But there was another one o nan adjoining building, with a small cornice connecting the two. He sprang and caught the latter escape and climbed it, followed by a muscular patrolman.

From the fourth story landing he could jump by an effort to the other landing, where he could see the two figures in their halo of flame, but there was that red-hot grill. A flimsy cornice intervened, already blistering and crackling with heat. That was the only bridge across. Would it hold? Could he make it? Well, there was a chance. He gave a signal to the chief below and started for it.

That signal was for water—water to cool the grill, to save the cornice while he needed it for a footing, to save his own clothes from the flames that leaped about him.

It was pretty work for the men below to play that heavy stream about him and yet not knock him off his frail perch. But they did it safely, somehow, and Decker did his part. Two minutes later, while the crowd below cheered excitedly, Decker and the patrolman came slowly down the fire escape, each with a burden in his arms, the last inmates of the lodging house, which all but collapsed as they reached the street.

But these experiences are comomn; every fire driver could add to the list of stories. So, too, could the horses if they were able to talk.

Veteran "George" had another scrape beside the one cited, in which the two horses hitched with him were killed. Time and again a single horse has suffered death beside him. It would seem only simple charity to retire this faithful animal now from the dangerous post he has filled so well for so many years.

But Captain Hughes laughed at the suggestion. "He's too good a horse," said he, and he added: "He wouldn't be happy if we did. Last year we sent him to another station for a rest, but he took sick—homesickness, I all it was—and we had to bring back. He was glad to get back right. Shook hands all around, then began to eat his oats—just as well as ever."

Upstairs the captain showed me medals his horses got in the last horse parade. It was characteristic him and of other firemen that he exhibit these medals first, and pro and his own later and only after ond request.

It is a Bennett medal and it "For meritorious services," with a fireman means, "For hero

"What did you do?" I asked

The captain looked sneaky and conscious, like a schoolboy in exercises. "Oh, I brought down man and five children," said he but the records give a fuller de tion.

It happened some years ago, Captain Hughes was plain John H driver for the present fire chief was then a deputy. They were back from a Washington stree when the chief's quick eye saw and flames streaming out of story window at 176 Greenwich They stopped and the driver down. "Do what you can," sa chief, and drove swiftly to the fire alarm box.

Driver Hughes did what he which, as firemen interpret it, simple duty. He climbed a spout to the fire escape and swiftly upward toward where a zied mother and five children str their arms to him.

They were not at the fire escap dow—that was filled with flame ironwork was blistering hot—but adjoining one, toward which H using elbows and knees against iron, worked his painful and d ous way and began stolidly his w rescue.

Twice he was all but hurled fr perch, but a leg twisted about th der saved him. First the older insane with fear, jumped wildly and all but broke his hold. Ag nearly fell with the struggling in his arms. He had to tear the est child's arms from the mother to get her out and down, and th dren, two at a time, he carried a across the cornice.

It was quick, hard work for on to do. They know about these in the department, and Hughes, was quickly promoted and sent the line to the captaincy he now This is the only way the depar praises.

It was dangerous, heroic work There were thrilling moments rescue, a good description of would hold the breath in suspens the records never speak of thes ters and you would never get from Captain Hughes.

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